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Supervision – Memos

November 28, 1922.

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. GUTHRIE

The following from Washington Irving's "Adventures of Captain Bonneville U. S. A." may be of interest to your department for the Six Twenty-Six or in writing up fire stories.

Captain Bonneville Encounters Forest Fires in 1833

When Captain Bonneville and his party of trappers were enroute across the Blue Mountains from the Snake River to the Columbia River in August 1833, they encountered forest fires as fierce as any we have nowadays but no pen has pictured the fire demon any more effectively than did Washington Irving in his "Adventures of Captain Bonneville U. S. A."

"It was the season of setting fire to the prairies. As he advanced, he began to perceive great clouds of smoke at a distance, rising by degrees, and spreading over the whole face of the country. The atmosphere became dry and surcharged with murky vapor, parching to the skin, and irritating to the eyes. When traveling among the hills, they could scarcely discern objects at the distance of a few paces; indeed, the least exertion of the vision was painful. There was evidently some vast conflagration in the direction towards which they were proceeding; it was as yet at a great distance, and during the day they could only see the smoke rising in larger and denser volumes, and rolling forth in an immense canopy. At night, the skies were all glowing with the reflection of unseen fires; hanging in an immense body of lurid light, high above the horizon."

"During four days that the party were ascending Gun Creek, the smoke continued to increase so rapidly that it was impossible to distinguish the face of the country and ascertain landmarks. Fortunately the travellers fell upon an Indian trail, which led them to the head waters of the Fourche de Glace, or Ice River, sometimes called the Grand Rond. Here they found all the plains and valleys wrapped in one vast conflagration; which swept over the long grass in billows of flame, shot up every bush and tree, rose in great columns from the groves, and sent up clouds of smoke that darkened the atmosphere. To avoid this sea of fire, the travelers had to pursue their course close along the foot of the mountains; but the irritation from the smoke continued to be tormenting."

"The country about the head waters of the Grand Rond spreads out into broad and level prairies, extremely fertile, and watered by mountain springs and rivulets. These prairies are resorted to by small bands of the Skynses, to pasture their horses as well as to banquet upon the salmon which abound in the neighboring waters."

"The travelers continued, for many days, to experience great difficulties and discomforts from this wide conflagration, which seemed to embrace the whole wilderness. The sun was for a great part of the time obscured by the smoke, and the loftiest mountains were hidden from view. Blundering along in this region of mist and uncertainty they were frequently obliged to make long circuits, to avoid obstacles which they could not perceive until close upon them. The Indian trails were their safest guides, for though they sometimes appeared to lead them out of their direct course, they always conducted them to the passes."

"The flames, which swept rapidly over the light vegetation of the prairies, assumed a fiercer character, and took a stronger hold amidst the wooded glens and ravines of the mountains. Some of the deep gorges and defiles sent up sheets of flame, clouds of lurid smoke, and sparks and cinders, that in the night made them resemble the craters of volcanoes. The groves and forests, too, which crowned the cliffs, shot up their towering columns of fire, and added to the furnace glow of the mountains. With these stupendous sights were combined the rushing blasts caused by the rarefied air, which roared and howled through the narrow glens, and whirled forth the smoke and flames in impetuous wreaths. Ever and anon, too, was heard the crash of falling trees, sometimes tumbling from crags and precipices, with tremendous sounds."

"In the daytime, the mountains were wrapped in smoke, so dense and blinding that the explorers, if by chance they separated, could only find each other by shouting. Often, too, they had to grope their way through the yet burning forests, in constant peril from the limbs and trunks of trees, which frequently fell across their path. At length they gave up the attempt to find a pass as hopeless, under actual circumstances, and made their way back to the camp to report their failure.

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